

Dr. Leri Post Testimony

Law + Justice
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SB337, SB338, SB368, SB369



Good afternoon,

I would like to thank the Honorable Rick Jones for letting me speak to the Senate judicial committee on *female genital mutilation*.

First and foremost, I want to acknowledge the gravity of female genital mutilation and at the same time, I want to commend you for introducing bills to end a practice that has endured time immemorial.

We are making history today! These bills are much bigger than Michigan. The globe has its eyes on what occurs with these bills and what we talk about today. I learned about the bills from a civil rights lawyer in France who works in this space. There are researchers, activists and civil rights lawyers working globally to end this practice. I confirmed it with the Honorable Jones about the bills and was delighted to see senators in Michigan taking a stand on a political football. Thank you for having the courage to take a move these bills forward.

I wanted to give you a quick overview of my background and how female genital mutilation is central to my work. I am a violence researcher and have been conducting research and policy analysis in this arena more than 30 years ago. I am also trained in International Development and African studies. I learned about FGM when I was 18 years of age in an anthropology class at Michigan State University. I was so deeply disturbed, I had to walk out of class because I could not bear to watch a film on FGM. In the last few years, I have been working on studies with the USAID, the Department of Agriculture – International in the 22 poorest countries in the world. The objective of these studies is to intensify agriculture to feed the world and end extreme poverty.

We cannot begin to intensify agriculture until some underlying issues are addressed -- principally addressing the human rights violations of women. Women are responsible for feeding families on a global level, mostly as small share holder farmers, and yet they have no voice in the decision making including FGM. There are laws at the federal level, state or canton level in most every country in the world that prohibits FGM. Every religious leader in the world has condemned FGM. Most every president, prime minister and political leaders have

spoken out against FGM. And yet it persists. Plus there are several treaties such as the Malabo Declaration outlining how women have civil rights. Laws exist at many levels and yet women are denied a means to earn a living, it makes her dependent on a husband, which puts her in harm's way for a variety of reasons. Today we will focus on FGM.

What is most remarkable is that in resource poor countries, there are high prevalence rates of FGM because parents cannot arrange a marriage unless the girl child has her genitals scraped off. I am here today to talk about what is happening in hotspot states and the US at large. The best I can do for you is to provide you with information to make informed decisions about FGM laws. AS we go forward with these bills, we must ensure that there is accountability or the laws will have no impact which is the case in the bulk of countries that practice FGM. A female must have a means to redress violations of her civil rights or the laws are worth nothing. Today I am asking you not only to pass these bills, but to ensure their existence is disseminated along with the penalties. I now work with the United Nations and make presentations in Europe, Africa and the US to explain what FGM is, why it exist and how we can end it. Besides the obvious health consequences, FGM interferes with western initiatives to intensify agriculture because FGM causes women a lifetime of pain which makes farming challenging.

I also wanted to make you aware that FGM is the subject being addressed this Friday by the governor's appointed Domestic Violence Prevention and Treatment Board. There is a lawyer there who worked for the Michigan supreme court who will be bringing the case before the board. Policy needs to happen at many levels to end FGM

I want to explain what it is and how the myths surrounding FGM circumvents initiatives to end it.

What is female genital mutilation?

Female genital mutilation is a collective term used for the various degrees of cutting on the female external organs. It takes one of four forms or commonly a form of each three.

- The least invasive surgery is removing the clitoris.

- The most extreme version which is also the most common involves removing the clitoris, clitoral hood, labia minor, labia major, the sides of the vagina are scored or sliced and the vagina is sewn shut except for a small straw to urinate and to pass blood during menstruation.
- **Whatever the form of the cut, women are subjected to intense pain.**
- 200,000 girls in the US are at risk for the surgery every year meaning they have reached an age and belong to a group that practices FGM.
- 300 million females globally have endured this harmful traditional practice and does not include those females who died from the procedure or those babies born to infibulated women who are going to die. It does not include those women who are mutilated that are going to die and not included in the tallies.

Myths – We must go forward based on truth and informed by science thus I need to strongly convey that the myths surrounding FGM have created a divisive politically charged response. FGM is bi partisan. To keep it bi partisan, we must pay attention and speak out whenever you hear a “myth” about FGM.

- **Myth #1 – Only Muslims practice FGM.** Stop blaming Muslims. The majority of Muslims do NOT practice FGM. FGM is practiced in sub Saharan Africa in countries that are majority Christian. It is also practiced in some North African Countries. **Although FGM is primarily seen in Africa there is overwhelming evidence that it has seeped beyond the African borders and practice as tradition in pockets of the Middle East, Indonesia, Iraqi Kurdistan, Yemen and Asia, South Africa as well as Iran, Yemen, Malaysia and Indonesia, and South America.**
- **Myth #2 - Female genital mutilation is a developing world problem.** There are **however** many developed countries that have populations who practice FGM such as the United States, England, France, Australia, and Canada **amongst diaspora communities round the world and in many immigrant.**

- Myth #3 - The proper terms for this procedure are cutting and circumcision. It is inappropriate to use the word "cutting" or "female Circumcision". **Cutting, excision, infibulation and circumcision are euphemisms that may reflect the unease in discussing female genitalia. The word mutilation precisely defines what takes place when a girl is subjected to this practice. FGM draws attention to the stark gravity of this ritual procedure. These terms soft peddle FGM and undermine efforts to end FGM and more importantly, minimize the trauma, the pain, the sense of betrayal victims' experience.**
- Myth #4 - We should respect other cultures and not be involved in ending FGM. There is a difference between cultural norms and harmful traditional practices. FGM is a harmful traditional practice. We just bombed Syria for poisoning and killing their citizens. FGM pervasive and not reserved for only a few. **FGM wreaks havoc on women simply and only because they are female. This gender based violence that is manifested as a harmful customary or traditional practices reduces women and girls to mere commercial commodities. All types of FGM do not harmonize with the recognized human rights gender landscape of the twentieth first century that has acknowledge that many forms of VAW are masked under cultural and tradition rites. As a nation, we are expected to become involved during genocides, the violation of civil liberties and to promote democracy globally. Taking a stand against FGM makes good US policy.**
- It is a global problem and we must advocate for girls who cannot advocate for themselves. **FGM is grotesquely not in harmony with today's international human rights standards. FGM is a baseless trampling on the human rights and dignity of women and the right to be physically whole.**
- Myth #5 – The medicalization of FGM will make it a safer practice and a compromise is better than nothing. What if we compromise to make it more palatable to persons wanting this surgery for their daughters by doing a less severe form or letting doctors do it in a hospital? **What is tragically lacking in the misguided clumsy assertion that medicalization is a viable**

option is ignoring the fact that all types of FGM have been recognized as a harmful practice that violates the human rights of girls and women.

- **Absolutely NOT! It is nobody's right to gamble away a female's sexuality and to perform surgeries that have absolutely no medical benefit.**
- **IT robs girls of their sexuality, it results in high morbidity and mortality because it is usually performed in unsanitary conditions where adults hold the child down while somebody uses razors or other glass or metal tools to scrape away female sex organs.**
- **By advocating medicalization as a lesser evil and as an acceptable alternative it effectively promotes a watered-down euphemism of Type IV FGM with a new name: medicalization.**
- **It is a means to control females. It reflects a deep-rooted inequality between the sexes and constitutes an extreme form of discrimination against women. This practice takes place only because the person is a women.**
- **Why not perform this procedure in hospitals that are sanitary and there is anesthesia and antibiotics to address pain and infections? This reasoning is flawed for many reasons.**
- **Medicalization is an outright attack against the sexual and psychological integrity of young girls, many who simply are not in a position to say no or unable to give informed consent or to effectively resist the practice.**
- **In spite of its perceived positive impacts, the medicalization of FGM is not an appropriate response to the health risks associated with FGM as all FGM still causes a variety of negative outcomes for the health and psychological well-being of women and girls.**

- **The more invasive the mutilation the higher degree of short and later complications.**
 - First, going back to the first assumption, it is nobody's right to violate the civil rights of females and to rob females of their sexuality.
 - Furthermore, many of these girls who have a doctor perform it, end up getting full infibulation after first childbirth.
 - **Undergoing a nick does not guarantee it will stop there. The medicalization trend does not take into account the high probability that women and girls will be subjected to FGM more than once during their lifetime.**
 - **Obstetric complications are the most frequent and spectacular and result from vicious scars in the clitoral zone after FGM.** Girls who have been mutilated may have fistulas and perforated uterus because the vagina will not stretch during childbirth due to the extensive scarring.
 - Finally, a sedated child will not move and the doctor ends up removing more tissue than what occurs if the child is awake and writhing in pain.
 - In addition to pain, violating civil rights of females and infections, what are the health implications? **There is no single practice which has such a dramatic negative effect on health in the broadest sense as FGM. The consequences of FGM remain with woman throughout their lives due to the amount of surgical alteration, repeated surgical openings and re-stitching.**
 - Most of the women or girls who undergo mutilation quite often develop secondary chronic infections of the uterus and vagina. After full infibulation, the vagina heals shut if the girl child survives. The

vagina is cut open on the girl's wedding day and she must consummate a marriage the same day.

- FGM is not a single event, it involves a series of surgeries, stitching and cutting.
- Myth #5 - Mothers, grandmothers, and aunties don't love their children who do this and should be held accountable for barbarian practices?
 - All mothers love their daughters. **It is a fact that in many societies that a woman who fails to marry virtually does not exist because traditional attitudes and norms leave no place for an unmarried or childless women. It is also understood among the populace that no one marries an un mutilated woman.** In the eyes of mothers, grandmothers, aunties and village women it is the Sophie's choice. If they do not allow their daughters to be mutilated, girls in resource scarce countries will not be able to get a husband, feed herself. It is the lessor of two evils.
 - Women must marry in patriarchal societies to access farming land and food.

How can we end female genital mutilation?

- Raise awareness globally. Most Americans do not know it is happening.
- Continuing vocal condemnation and well written editorials to media and social platforms. Only when practicing nations not only puts laws in place, the first step in banning this senseless practice, but also gives the laws teeth to clearly send the message that no means no , the long road to eradication will shorten. **Hopefully as the new internet and IT savvy generation reject and turns its back on FGM, this will further strengthen the fight against FGM.**

- **The criminalization of FGM is considered to be one of the mechanisms that helps to strengthen the global fight against FGM. FGM legal provisions are found in a variety of domains, including criminal and child protection laws. We are seeing declines for the first time in my life and I am very old.**
- **Combatting FGM necessitates a triple approach, prevention through education, publicity and the use of the criminal system to send the message that Zero tolerance means Zero tolerance.**
- **FGM is a crime and we must hold those accountable for performing this procedure in the US or taking surgery vacations to have it done.**
- **An excellent model is how Chinese women put an end to footbinding by having the woman in a village sign a contract that she would not allow her sons to marry foot-bound girls. It created eligible pools of bachelors. After 1000 years, the practice was eradicated in only 3 years.**

I want to close by thanking you for coming today and listening a difficult topic and please know that I am always available as well as a network of persons around the globe. Please lead the US in ending FGM and be a leader globally.

Testimonial
FGM: The Ultimate Child Abuse
By Soraya Mire'



Many women in my side of the world are still kept in hell on earth, their voices cut off and many of those who didn't make it go unnoticed, nameless and vanished as if they were never in existence. And those of us who survived are left with an option to either go along with the cultural torture and abuse or detach ourselves from our roots, our culture and even our family. As we speak, many young children, from birth and on are being brutally mutilated with or without Anastasia, having their healthy organs cut off. Those young children's innocence is stolen and will be left scared physically, mentally, emotional, and spiritually. Then they are forced to live in a darkened world where their cultural inferiority is reinforced and their basic human rights are denied.

I have known two kinds of pain, the first, a stabbing between my legs, the second, reliving it to tell my story. As I write this, I found myself plunging back into the nightmares of what happened that day. I hope that telling my story will heal those who are suffering and create change. My name is Soraya Mire' born in Somalia to a wealthy family and with all of that high regards it did not change the fact that I was still a prisoner held within my own culture. I was born into a female body which automatically labeled me a defected human being in need of reconstruction. I was only 13 years old when my mother told me that she was going to buy me a gift. At 13 years of age, my world shattered and the gift turned out to be the worst day of my life. That day is still vivid in my mind; I found myself lying on a surgical table, with my hands tied, rough hands pulling things from a place I was never touched. I felt the prick of the sharp needle, then hands plucked at my lips- my labia minora and majora- like a giraffe feasting on thorny branches. Then I heard the sound of the scissors cutting away my flesh. The unbearable pain made me think that I was sitting on a sewing machine, watched my body become a piece of cloth, sliding through the machine, needles biting into my skin. But the worst image was my mother watching me scream in pain, as she stood there and did nothing.

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is a tradition, a rite of passage, a mutilation handed down from mother to daughter and protected by the word of culture. FGM is nothing but cultural abuse and torture. It allows the society to view women like chicken without heads. These chickens can't be trusted to make the right decision about their bodies especially their most private parts. Women must be controlled and subjugated by all means necessary. Many will do anything to protect harmful rituals and cultural beliefs even when they suffer silently. Therefore it's hard to understand why a mother who herself suffered this mutilation, would put her own daughter through the mutilating ritual and watch her become nothing more than the pleasurable commodity of men. The innocence of a child's soul that collides with the ultimate pain and betrayal.

Type 1: Clitoridectomy- total or partial removal of the clitoris (erectile/sensitive part of the female genitals)

Type 2: Excision- total or partial removal of the clitoris and the small lips (labia minora) sometimes with or without excision of the large lips (labia majora)

Type 3: infibulation- removal of the clitoris, the small and large lips. Then narrowing of the vagina opening through the creation of a covering seal. Once stitched a small hole is left behind to allow for the urination and menstrual flow.

Type 4: pricking, scraping, cauterizing the genital area, piercing a hot needle into the clitoris and incision.

Short and Long Term Complications are: Shock, pain, hemorrhage, failure to heal, psychological trauma, chronic infection, keloid scar formation, severe pain during urination, menstruation and sexual intercourse, increased risk of newborn deaths, difficulties of childbirth which often creates the fistulas

Female Genital mutilation is practiced in the Middle East, African countries, Central Asia , Far East and South America- such countries as Egypt, Sudan, Somalia, Libya, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Turkey, Afghanistan, Colombia, Malaysia, Iraqi Kurdistan, Iran, India, Pakistan, Yemen, Thailand...

Female Genital Mutilation is torture, the ultimate child abuse. It's a human rights abuse and we must protect young children so that they can decide their destiny and have their rights under the law. As a woman who was subjected to Female Genital Mutilation wants justice for those young children who were mutilated. Any parent, doctor or midwife who refuses to obey the law must receive harsh punishment and lose their children. We must stop this madness, pain against children. Therefore, I support Senate Bill 337 and stand with Senator Rick Jones to make the practice of Female Genital Mutilation a crime in Michigan.

I dedicated my life to end FGM so that the darkened world could be a better place for children. I hope by sharing my personal pain will illustrate the physical and psychological harm of Female Genital Mutilation.

Thank you,
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